9

Damascius' Ineffable Discourse

Introduction to Damascius and the *Aporiai kai Luseis Peri Proton Archon (Doubts and Solutions Concerning First Principles)*

Damascius (ca. 462–538) was scholarch when the Christian emperor Justinian shut down the Platonic Academy in 529, issuing a decree that banned all pagans from teaching in Athens. Damascius' title, Diadochus, marked him as last in the ancient lineage of Platonic Successors.[1] His attempts to revitalize the foundering school no doubt made it a target of anti-pagan persecution, a persecution that followed in the wake of violent attacks directed against Neoplatonists active in the city of Alexandria.[2] Upon the closing of the Academy, Damascius led a band of pagan philosophers out of their patron city and into exile.[3] We learn from the historian Agathias that

> Damascius the Syrian, Simplicius the Silician, Eulamius the Phrygian, Priscian the Lydian, Hermeias and Diogenes from Phoenicia and Isidorus of Gaza, all the finest flower, as the poem says, of those who did philosophy in our time, since they did not like the prevailing opinion among the Greeks, and thought the Persian constitution to be far better . . . went away to a different and pure place with the intention of spending the rest of their lives there.[4]

There is some disagreement about the fate of the exiled philosophers after their disappointment over conditions in Persia. It is now

[1] *Vita Isidore.* Saffrey and Westerink, tome 1, Introduction; Cameron 1969.

[2] Athanassiadi 1993

[3] See Blumenthal's account of Damascius' perigrinations in *Aristotle and Neoplatonism in Late Antiquity*, pp. 41–4.

[4] Agathias, 2.30-3-4, quoted and translated by Blumenthal, p. 42.

disputed that they settled at Haran and thereby transplanted a branch of the school into Near Eastern soil.[5] At any rate, Damascius' work, *Doubts and Solutions Concerning First Principles*, is significant because it is one of the few original metaphysical treatises to have survived from Late Athenian Neoplatonism and because it presents a compendium of pagan philosophical and religious traditions as they existed at the close of an epoch.

Doubts and Solutions Concerning First Principles (hereafter referred to as the *Peri Archon*) is thus a philosophical and historical monument, the work of a man charged with both defending pagan faith and bolstering the intellectual morale of his own colleagues. Faced with increasing hostility and competition from Christianity, the Neoplatonists found it was time to break the silence maintained for centuries concerning their mystery religions and to publish their own, alternative salvation narratives as part of a concerted effort at a pagan revival.[6] Because it is a celebration of pagan mysteries as well as a critical overhaul of Platonic school doctrine, the *Peri Archon* is of inestimable value for the study of the histories of Western metaphysics and Western religions. Specifically, it shows the Neoplatonists engaged in an intense debate over the issue of metaphysical dualism throughout their centuries of dogmatizing. The *Peri Archon* offers a brilliant internal critique of Neoplatonic metaphysics, shedding much light on questions of method and dialectic within the last phase of the Academy.

Earlier we looked at Proclus' *Platonic Theology* and saw that Neoplatonists held that Plato's *Parmenides* was a theological disquisition that charted not only the fundamental principles of reality but also the emergence of any possible form of being from one transcendent source.[7] It is in this tradition of exegesis of Plato's *Parmenides* that the *Peri Archon* finds its place.

Plotinus launched the tradition. In *Enneads* V.1 he interprets the

[5] Cameron 1969; Combès, 1986–91, tome 1, Introduction, p. xxi. For the dispute, see Blumenthal, pp. 44–6, and M. Tardieu, "Les Calendriers en usage à Harran d'àpres des sources arabes et le commentaire de Simplicus à la Physique d'Aristote," in *Simplicius, sa vie, son oeuvre, sa survie*, Actes du colloque international de Paris, Peripatoi 15 (Berlin and New York).

[6] Athanassiadi 1993; Saffrey 1992.

[7] Saffrey 1987.

three initial hypotheses of Plato's *Parmenides* as adumbrating his own metaphysical doctrine, according to which reality has different levels; some things are, quite simply, more real than other things. The three major divisions of reality in Plotinus' schema are the One, Intellect, and Soul. If the One is beyond Being (a premise that Plotinus took directly from Plato's *Republic*) then Being emerges only as a subsequent stage of reality, at the level of Intellect, while transitory Being originates in the third hypostasis, or Soul. Plotinus left it for his followers to iron out the details of precisely how the entire dialogue mapped onto the universe as a whole. Proclus, the fifth-century Athenian Neoplatonist, left a catalogue of these attempts in book VI of his *Commentary on the Parmenides* (col. 1052.31 ff.). There he set forth in astonishing detail the evolution of this exegetical tradition, beginning with Plotinus' disciples, Amelius and Porphyry, and ending with the interpretation of his own teacher, Syrianus.[8]

On all of the surviving manuscripts, *Doubts and Solutions Concerning First Principles* is found in continuation with another work of Damascius, his *Commentary on the Parmenides.* As we have just seen, the *Peri Archon* forms part of the exegetical tradition on Plato's *Parmenides,* yet it is not formally a commentary and should perhaps be seen as an independent work apart from the *Parmenides* commentary. The *Peri Archon* concerns itself with the first hypostasis, the Ineffable, the One, and the noetic triad, whereas Damascius' *Commentary on the Parmenides* proceeds by discussing the theological implications of all nine of the hypotheses recognized in the Neoplatonist's reading of the dialogue, beginning with the intelligible diacosm. *Marianus Gr.* 246, the unique manuscript witness to Damascius' major writings, contains one small clue about the overall nature of his project in the *Doubts and Solutions Concerning First Principles.* In F. 435^{r} we read the following colophon: "The Doubts and Solutions of Damascius the Platonic Successor on the Parmenides of Plato, matching and disputing the Commentary of the Philosopher [sc. Proclus]."[9] This title fits well with the work's structure. Damascius often proceeds by using Proclus' *Commentary on the Parmenides* as the basis for the lemmas in

[8] Dillon and Morrow 1987, Introduction, section B. Saffrey 1965.

[9] Δαμασκίου διαδόχου εἲς τὸν Πλάτωνος Παρμενίδην ἀπορίαι καὶ ἐπιλύσεις ἀντιπαρατεινόμεναι τοῖς εἲς αὐτὸν ὑπομνήμασιν τοῦ φιλοσόφου.

his own commentary; in the *Peri Archon*, Damascius seems more interested in scrutinizing the fundamental doctrines of Proclan metaphysics.

The handbook of metaphysical puzzles that appears under the title, *Doubts and Solutions Concerning First Principles*, then, relates to the first two Neoplatonic hypostases, the One, and Being/Intellect. By far the most difficult issue involves the causal status of the first principle, or One. Tensions between a transcendent One, utterly unrelated to any form of Being, and an originary One, source and support of all reality, broke out in the doctrinal disputes of Plotinus' successors, with Porphyry elevating the causal aspect of the One at the risk of collapsing the second hypostasis into the first. Responding to this solution, Iamblichus proposed that there were two first principles before the level of Being: the first One, not associated with causality, and a second One, which was.[10] We learn of this debate in the *Peri Archon*, where Damascius' historical narrative punctuates his own metaphysical queries. Damascius uses this issue as an introduction to his handbook. At the heart of the Neoplatonists' metaphysical enterprise is a fundamental contradiction, according to Damascius: If all things come from the absolute, then the absolute is a principle or a cause of other things. But if the absolute is a cause, it is no longer the absolute, since it then exists in relation to others.

In the *Peri Archon*, central Platonic dogmas are analyzed and often swept away. What is left in their place? Damascius characterizes the results of his inquiry as "a reversal of discourse." To motivate this reversal, there are a number of methodological resources at his disposal, including certain techniques that recall Skeptical strategies, a tendency to argue *in utramque partem*, and a heavy emphasis on the *via apophatica*. The "reversal of discourse" that Damascius so often alludes to refers to an emphasis upon method, to an investigation of the process of inquiry. This methodological self-awareness is one of the most innovative features of the *Peri Archon*.

Moreover, the *Peri Archon* discusses theoretical issues underlying the Neoplatonic theories of causation and emanation, according to which successively lower orders of reality proceed from the first principle, or One, in a process of undiminished and indefinite self-

[10] Dillon, *Iamblichi Chalcidensis in Platonis dialogos commentariorum fragmenta.*

extension on the part of this first principle. Damascius affirms the principle previously enunciated by Proclus, that this entire devolution of reality is based on a series of negations. If we negate the Ineffable, the result is the One. Failing to grasp the Ineffable, the mind projects the idea of the One in the form of a series of Henads, and so forth. This failure and subsequent projection continue to occur all the way down the long chain of being. Yet unlike the extreme realism of Proclus, for whom the ontological categories of traditional metaphysics were all reified as components of reality's fullness, Damascius hints that the devolution of reality is itself only partially real. We will return to this observation shortly.

Compared to prior Commentators in this tradition, Damascius' innovations are the replacement of the One by the Ineffable, a move whose methodological and doctrinal consequences will be surveyed, as well as a continuation of the concept of procession through the four negative hypotheses of Plato's *Parmenides.* Previously, Neoplatonists had worked only with the positive hypotheses of Plato's *Parmenides,* that is, with all the theses couched in such terms as "if the One exists." In the exegetical tradition beginning with Plotinus, Neoplatonists argued that the Parmenidean hypotheses described the process of emanation from the One; Plato's "consequences" represent the various stations of Being that derive from the One, in Proclus' words, "the genesis and procession of the gods."[11] Damascius, by contrast, also discussed the levels of reality associated with the negative hypotheses, or with those theses expressed in such terms as "if the One does *not* exist." This last innovation has become the basis of a somewhat controversial interpretation of Damascius' philosophy as a whole, developed systematically by Joseph Combès in a number of articles as well as in the introductions to his translations.[12]

[11] Proclus, *Platonic Theology,* III, p. 162. On this passage, see Steel, chapter 4. See also the survey of Saffrey-Westerink in the Introduction to volume I of Proclus' *Platonic Theology,* pp. lxxv–lxxxiv.

[12] All the relevant articles are cited by Combès on pp. xxxii–xxxiii, n. 5, of his Introduction to tome I of the *Traité des premiers principes.* See especially Combès 1977, "Damascius et les hypothèses négatives du Parménides" According to Combès' interpretation, Damascius turns to the the negative hypotheses of the *Parmenides* (if the One is not) to seek the principles that allow the sensible to manifest. Damascius thus continues the exegesis of Plato by concentrating on Plato's interest in the origins of illusion, of the phenomenal world. Combès discusses the *Parmenides* and

Overview of Damascius' Philosophy: Non-dualism

Already I have adumbrated several differences between Damascius and Proclus in the realm of ontology. The first five principles alluded to in the *Peri Archon* refer to a structure or system consisting of the Ineffable, the One, and the noetic triad,[13] which are roughly the equivalent of the first two Proclan hypostases, the One and Being/Intellect, also called the dyad.[14] As we will see more clearly by the end of this chapter, Damascius also criticizes Proclus' views on the Henads, causation, emanation, and intellect. However, it is not just doctrinal disagreement that occasions Damascius' objections to Proclus. In his methodology, Damascius is aporetic rather than dogmatic, is more appreciative of the provisional nature of certain metaphysical solutions, and places a great deal of emphasis on a non-dual perspective. By "non-dual" in this context, I mean that for Damascius' philosophy, a certain perspective remains operative and conditions any statement made about the nature of reality. This perspective is perhaps best expressed by Damascius when he writes:

> As many things as constitute the multiplicity in a divided mode, the One is all of these things before its division . . . The One dissolves all things by means of its own simplicity and it is All things before [they are] all things. (C-W I, 24.11)

In Damascius' debate with the tradition, what is at stake is the status of the One. The dialectical examination of transcendence itself stems from a certain commitment to carrying out implications of non-dualism within his philosophical methods. Damascius intends

Sophist in terms of their reification of non-being and believes that Damascius treats non-Being not just as a linguistic phenomenon, but as integral to his own ontology as well as to Plato's. Damascius, according to Combès, sees the soul as the principle of non-Being and is interested, accordingly, in a "discourse of appearance" that takes as its rightful subject the soul. Since this chapter concerns itself only with the *Doubts and Solutions Concerning First Principles*, I will not be studying the implications of Damascius' innovations with regard to the Parmenidean hypotheses. Damascius' concern with the psychology of illusion is, I believe, an interesting topic because it complements his theory of the completely descended soul.

13 This enumeration of five principles is somewhat tendentious because of the provisional or contested nature of Damascius' solutions to the earlier dispute concerning the status of the first principle.

14 On the relationship between Damascius' noetic triad and Proclus' dyad, see Linguiti, chapter 3.

not to inculcate an ontology of the One, but rather to inculcate a philosophy that is situated within the first principle. As a consequence, all statements about lower hypostases or about an ontology situated outside of the first principle are subject to the caveat that "the One dissolves all things by means of its own simplicity." All things, including Being itself, fall short of the One; their reality is merely provisional. Sometimes we see Damascius questioning fundamental Neoplatonist principles, such as the identity of knower and known in the act of intellectual knowing, or the complete transcendence of the One with respect to its effects. This non-dual approach to metaphysics can often look like Skeptical *epoche*. Although Damascius was no doubt acquainted with the writings of Sextus Empiricus and other Skeptics, the destructive side of his metaphysics represents his own attempts to bolster the tradition from within.[15] In this chapter I will be arguing that the *Peri Archon* is of great importance for the history of Neoplatonism because it shows how deeply felt was the critique of discursivity within this tradition, despite its seemingly positivistic conceptions. The aporetic method of Damascius subverts the metaphysical ambitions of his tradition insofar as they threaten to abandon the search for wisdom in favor of a complacent dogmatism.

In his general introduction to Proclus' *Commentary on the Parmenides*, John Dillon attempts to sketch some of the fundamental principles of Procline metaphysics. He starts with Proposition 11 of the *Elements of Theology*, "All that exists proceeds from a single first cause." As we will shortly discover, Damascius explicitly criticizes this proposition in the opening paragraphs of the *Peri Archon*. For now, we turn to Dillon's discussion of *ET* 11:

> The basic problem with which all Neoplatonic speculation is concerned, from Plotinus on, is how a multiplicity, and worse, a multiplicity of levels of being, can derive from a totally transcendent and simple One. Plotinus had propounded the theory of undiminished giving by the One, the image of the inexhaustible spring, which creates without being affected by its creation (e.g. *Enn.* V,3.12). The universe thus produced from the One is a plenum, in which no gap can be tolerated (e.g. *Enn.* II,9.3). From Iamblichus on, as I have said, this principle leads to a progressive multiplication of entities . . . of moments within each hypostasis. The principle which Dodds calls the

[15] On Damascius' appropriation of Skeptical techniques, see Rappe 1998a and 1998b.

"law of continuity" is well stated by Proclus at *De Prov.* IV, 20: "the processions of real being, far more even than the positions of physical bodies in space, leave no vacuum, but everywhere there are mean terms between extremities, which provide for them a mutual linkage."[16]

Damascius begins his critique of Procline metaphysics by raising an aporia concerning the status of the first principle:

Is the one principle of all things beyond all things or is it one among all things, the summit of everything that proceeds from it? And are we to say that all are things with the [first principle], or after it and [that they proceed] from it? (C-W I.1 = R I.1.1-3)

To understand this puzzle, the reader must remember the debate, already mentioned, between Iamblichus and Porphyry concerning the status and number of principles before the first noetic triad:

Next let us turn to the question of whether there are two first principles before the first noetic triad, especially that [principle] which is completely Ineffable and which has no relationship to the triad (just as the great Iamblichus has it in his Twenty-eighth Book of his most perfect *Chaldean Theology*), or as the majority of those who came after him have supposed, after the Ineffable cause (which is also the One) comes the first intelligible triad, or should one go beneath this principle and agree with Porphyry in saying that the one cause of all things is itself the Father that belongs to the noetic triad? (C-W II.1.1–14)[17]

Damascius examines the issue fully in II 1–15 and tends to approve the position of Iamblichus as against Porphyry, without committing himself entirely to the Iamblichean solution. The name for the first One in the *Peri Archon* is the *arreton*, the Ineffable. Damascius surveys four arguments in support of the Iamblichean position and then goes on to refute these arguments from the viewpoint of the Ineffable. For example, Damascius considers the argument that posits a Pythagorean system according to which Remaining, Procession, and Return are hypostasized as the monad, dyad, and triad, respectively. This system would leave the Ineffable as that with which the monad remains, etymologizing from the name "monad" (μόνας) to the word μονή (C-W II 3–4). But as Damascius says in his critique of this

[16] Dillon 1987, pp. xvi–xvii, with a few omissions.

[17] For the details of this debate, see Dillon, Introduction to *Iamblichi Chalcidensis in Platonis dialogos commentariorum fragmenta*.

argument, it would then be difficult to distinguish this monad, or One, from the Ineffable:

> Now if the One is after the Ineffable, the departure from the One could not take the form of a Procession, since there would no longer be such a departure. The One would unify all things with each other and also with their native causes, to the extent that all things are One with the One, so that it would not even be able to distinguish itself from the Ineffable. Therefore, in positing this One, it nevertheless is shown to exist in the manner of the Ineffable. (C-W II 14.1–6)

Against the argument that attempts to distinguish a One unrelated to the noetic triad from the monad that is related, Damascius reminds the reader:

> In reality, concerning the argument based on the difference between the One and the Monad, we must recall that neither the Monad nor the One exists there in truth, so neither can we set up a difference between the One and the Monad. Rather the same hypothesis and the same figurative language covers both terms. (C-W II 13.1–5)

The point here is that the Ineffable cannot be the subject of a metaphysical argument or the basis of a metaphysical system at all. It cannot be either incorporated within or accounted for outside of the causal system that forms the structure of Neoplatonic metaphysics. From the point of view of the Ineffable, no such system exists. From the point of view of metaphysical discourse, the Ineffable is a term that can occupy no fixed place within the system:

> It is not above or below; it belongs neither to the category of first or ultimate, for there is no procession [from it]. It is not replete with all things nor yet does it contain all things; it is not within the realm of that which can be spoken, nor is it the One itself. (C-W I 24.7–10)

Consequently, all arguments for the Ineffable are ineffectual, if not self-refuting. In these sections, we can see the provisional nature of Damascius' solutions to the enigmas of Neoplatonic ontology. He does by all accounts found his own discourse on the Ineffable, but he is also careful to show that this principle is not a hypothetical construct, a logical consequence of a prior philosophical system, or a part of an explanatory apparatus.

As already mentioned, this historical debate forms the background for Damascius' introduction to the *Peri Archon*, to which we now return:

Is that which is designated as the one principle of all things beyond all things or is it one among all things, the summit of everything that proceeds from it? And are we to say that all things are with the [first principle], or after it and [that they proceed] from it? (CW I1.1–5) [18]

Damascius begins his treatise by asking, "Is the one principle of all things beyond all things, or is it one of all things?" Characteristically, he denies both sides of the dilemma: since "all things" designates that from which nothing is lacking, "all things" must include the cause of all things:

The term "all things" [refers] in the strict sense to that from which nothing is absent. But [now we are supposing that] the principle itself is missing. Therefore that which comes after the first principle is not in the strict sense all things, but rather all things except the first principle.

From its inception, the *Peri Archon* seemingly violates the fundamental assumption of Neoplatonic metaphysics, canonized in Proclus' *Elements of Theology*, that multiplicity derives from unity. For our purposes, number 75, that "every cause properly so-called transcends its effect," is breached at the outset in Damascius' *Peri Archon*, when he suggests that the "cause must be ranked among the effects." After dismissing the first half of the dilemma, Damascius goes on to reject the second. If all things include their cause, there is no cause for all things, since the cause will be included among its effects. But without the cause, the effect cannot exist.

Now if all things are together with the first principle, there cannot be a principle for all things, since on the supposition that the principle can be subsumed by all things, there would be no principle [i.e. no beginning, no cause] for all things. Therefore [let us say that] the single coordinated disposition of all things (which we designate by the term, 'all things') is without a first principle and uncaused, lest we [continue the search] *ad infinitum.* (C-W I 2.9–12)

Therefore, he concludes, all is neither from a cause, nor a cause: τὰ ἄρα πάντα οὔτε ἀρχὴ οὔτε ἀπ' ἀρχῆς.

[18] With this opening sentence of the *Peri Archon,* one can compare *ET* 5, "Every manifold is posterior to the One." To demonstrate this proposition, Proclus assumes the contrary, that the many are coexistent with the One, and that the One and the many are of the same order, σύστοιχα, by nature. He concedes that there is no objection to the One and the many being temporally coordinate. This admission will be important when we compare the Skeptics on the temporal aspect of causal relation.

In fact, Damascius denies the basic Neoplatonic theory of causation, the thesis that a cause is greater than its effects. In keeping with this theory of causation, Neoplatonists assume that the proliferation of effects from their causes means that reality constantly dispatches itself into inferior states of being. In a section of *Peri Archon* entitled "On the Unified," Damascius investigates the question of what would motivate this procession or descent, responding directly to the views of his predecessors, Syrianus and Proclus.

> Now it is worth considering what brings about the distinction between the unified and that which comes after the unified. For the unified itself could not be the cause of this distinction. That would be like the case of an opposite generating [its] opposite. Should we agree with the philosophers and answer that *the effect must be inferior to the cause?*

Here Damascius answers Proposition 7 of the *Elements*, "Every productive cause is superior to that which it produces,"[19] with the objection that derivation from a cause does not in itself account for the differences between cause and effect. Plotinus argued that the full nature of the cause was available for transmission to the effect.[20] It was only the inferior capacity of the effect to express the qualities of the cause that introduced the difference between cause and effect.[21] But why is it necessary that an effect prove inferior to its cause? Damascius applies his more general critique of causation to the specific case of procession:

> Now [let's look] in another way at a puzzle that is both ancient and modern. Either procession is from that which exists, in which case, how could what already exists previously [be able to] proceed? Or else procession comes from something that doesn't exist, yet what kind of being could come from something that doesn't exist? Something actual cannot come from something potential, since the former is superior to the latter, while the effect is always inferior to the cause. (R.I 226)

Having studied Damascius' reflections (C-W II.115) on this issue in the preceding quotation, we are in a better position to appreciate the import of his rather striking formulation, "therefore [let us say that] the single coordinated disposition of all things (which we designate by the term, 'all things') is without a first principle and un-

[19] Dodds 1963 translation.
[20] Lloyd 1990, pp. 106–107.
[21] Lloyd 1990, p. 107.

caused" (C-W I 2.9–12). On the surface, it looks as if Damascius here is simply denying Proclus' *ET* 11, "All that exists proceeds from a single cause." Although this is not literally false, it would be more true to say that here and throughout his discussion of causation, Damascius cautions us about the provisional nature of metaphysical tenets as such. Damascius does not specify a cause for all things or set up a unique cause that can be designated as the "first principle," but he does not thereby negate causation or posit a self-causing principle, since both of these alternatives would also be metaphysical tenets subject to the cautions established at the outset of the treatise:

> But if it is necessary to [assert something] by way of demonstration, then let us make use of the apophatic provisions, and say that It is neither One nor Many, neither Generative nor without issue, neither Cause nor without causal properties, and yet, [let us be aware that] these very provisions overturn themselves, I imagine, indefinitely. (C-W I 22.15–20)

At the beginning of this section, I quoted from John Dillon's introduction to *Proclus' Commentary on the Parmenides.* Dillon rightly points out that Proclus shapes the *Elements of Theology* as a speculative metaphysics, positing, in a sense, unity or the One as the exotic or extopic explanans for plurality, conceived as immediate, present to hand, and therefore requiring explanation. We can see that Damascius shifts the perspective of his metaphysics; he struggles to create a metaphysical discourse that accommodates, insofar as language can, the ultimate principle of reality. After all, how coherent is a metaphysical system that bases itself on the Ineffable as a first principle? Instead of creating an objective ontology, Damascius writes ever mindful of the limitations of dialectic, of the pitfalls and snares inherent in the very structure of metaphysical discourse.

The Status of Metaphysical Discourse

Damascius recognizes that the language of metaphysics functions to signify something beyond itself. It is best thought of as a mnemonic device; its purpose is to deliver human beings from their own ignorant determinations about the nature of reality, without thereby imprisoning them in a metaphysical system that displaces reality itself. Hence apophasis, denial or negation, is a method that not only negates all lesser realities, leaving only the Ineffable, it also applies

to the language of metaphysics itself. A certain denial or demotion, one might say, of the metaphysical enterprise as such, must be programmed into the very structure of such discourse.[22]

As we saw, it had become already a standard topos for Plotinus that his designation for the absolute principle, "the One," was not semantically significant, did not pick out any object, but simply indicated the refusal to designate. But for Damascius, the ineffability of the One engulfs the metaphysical enterprise, infecting it with nonsense, with in-significance. Because of it, we are forced to confront the question, how does the experience of ineffability ground the prospects for truth seeking? Here we turn to Damascius' own definition of "apophasis," in book I, chapter 42, of the *Peri Archon:*

> In one way, [the term] "The Ineffable" is apophatic. By this I do not mean that the term designates anything positive at all, but that this term is not even a negation: it is complete removal. It is not merely not-a-thing (since what is not-a-thing is still something) but it absolutely has no reality. So we define this term, "ineffable," in such a way that it is not even a term.

The "Ineffable" is a term that does not possess a meaning in the ordinary sense, since it has no semantic function. It is not a term so that its deployment in language conveys nothing at all to the reader or listener. That this word nevertheless forms the basis of Damascius' philosophical activity inevitably leads to a self-conscious meditation on the status of his own language, which Damascius often refers to as a radical reversal, or *peritrope,* of language. This admonition concerning the misdirection built into metaphysical language is related to a technical term, *endeixis,* a word that appears over one hundred times in the text of the *Peri Archon.* In our treatise, the word *endeixis* typically conveys the idea of hinting at or of suggesting a reality that is then left indeterminate. For Damascius and his school, the language of metaphysics is even at its best allusive; although metaphysical discourse provides us with an image of truth it cannot be conflated with truth and so is more symbolic or iconic than discur-

[22] Here I would like to invoke the concept of "performative intensity," that Michael Sells uses in his book, *The Mystical Languages of Unsaying,* to explain the otherwise mystifying *epoche,* or suspension of belief, that drives the structure of Damascius' exposition. Sells delineates an apophatic linguistic style characterized by a "continuing series of retractions, a propositionally unstable and dynamic discourse in which no single statement can rest on its own as true or false, or even as meaningful." Sells 1994.

sive. Thus Proclus and Simplicius both allow that any teaching about realities such as intellect and soul must take place by means of *endeixis*, by means of coded language.[23] Throughout the treatise, Damascius is at pains to remind the reader that he is speaking as a whole only provisionally, *kata endeixin*. In Neoplatonic texts, the word *endeixis* is linked to Pythagorean symbolism and conveys the sense of allusive or enigmatic language, though the history of its meaning must be recovered through aversion to Hellenistic scientific discourse.[24]

This word became prevalent in later Hellenistic epistemology as a means of distinguishing different kinds of signs.[25] Sextus Empiricus discusses primarily two sorts of signs: the mnemonic and the indicative.[26] Unlike the mnemonic sign, which simply formalizes the expected associations between any two events, where expectations follow directly from experience, the indicative sign designates a logical condition obtaining between two events or states of affairs.[27] To paraphrase Michael Frede, an indicative sign is one from which one can rationally infer the presence of an otherwise unmanifest object, as, for example, an atomist might infer the existence of the void from the existence of atoms. When used by ancient medical writers, the indicative sign stood for a method of diagnosing and treating illnesses.[28] The assumption governing the rationalist practitioner's

[23] Cf. Simplicius, *On Aristotle's On the Soul* 1.1–2.4, sections 26, 11–19; 28, 19; 30, 5, etc. Cf. also Proclus *In Parm.* 1027, 27–30; *In Rem.* I.5, 8;56, 3, 61, 9, etc. For these passages and a wealth of other references, see Peter Lautner's Introduction to the English translation of Simplicius' commentary on *De anima*, pp. 8–10: Simplicius, *On Aristotle's On the Soul 1.1–2.4*, translated by J. Urmson with Notes by Peter Lautner. Cornell 1995. I wish to thank Dr. Lautner for providing me with the reference to his work and for discussion about the subject of *endeixis* in Late Athenian Neoplatonism.

[24] Frede 1987b, pp. 263 ff., 276, 289, 293.

[25] This evidence is important in evaluating the Skeptical affiliations of Damascius, not least because it demonstrates his familiarity with a word that proved to be central in the epistemological debates between Skeptics (who discussed it in conjunction with denial of the possibility of logical inference) and dogmatists. The frequent appearance of this word in the *Peri Archon* increases the evidence that Damascius read the actual writings of the Skeptics and also suggests that his thought was colored by Skeptical modes of analysis. Sextus Empiricus *PH* II, sections 104–33; Mates, pp. 274–9.

[26] Sextus Empiricus *PH* II, sections 97–103.

[27] Frede 1987b, pp. 264–5.

[28] Frede 1987b, p. 265, quotes Galen *De sect. ing.* 2, 3; 5, 17; 10, 22.

approach to disease was that an indicative sign could lead to knowledge beyond the scope of personal experience. Thus, for the rationalist, "indication" signified the relation obtaining between the manifest state of the body (that is, the patient's symptoms) and the underlying hidden abnormal state, the disease.[29]

As used by Damascius, the word *endeixis* suggests that the language of metaphysics must be acknowledged to be at most a prompting toward inquiry into something that exceeds its own domain as descriptive.[30] The result of this inquiry tells us more about our own states of ignorance than about the goal of the search:

> If, in speaking about the One, we attempt the following collocations, viz. that it is ineffable, that it does not belong to the category of all things, and that it is not apprehensible by means of intellectual knowledge, then we ought to recognize that these constitute the language of our own labors. This language is a form of hyperactivity that stops on the threshold of the mystery without conveying anything about it at all. Rather, such language announces the subjective experiences of aporia and misapprehension that arise in connection with the One, and that not even clearly, but by means of hints . . . (C-W I 6.5–10)

Endeixis, hinting at reality, becomes a technique that captures features of the psychology of inquiry without successfully transcending the subjective. To describe philosophical discourse as *endeixis* is to limit its ambitions.[31] *Endeixis* in this sense is not a descriptive use of language, but encompasses a number of different linguistic devices. Thus, for example, the language of negation is not referential; negative adjectives when applied to the Ineffable do not attribute anything to it nor determine its nature. Instead, by using negative language we succeed only in delimiting our own discursive practices:

> Nor do we affirm that [the Ineffable] is unknowable in the sense that the unknowable has a determinate nature, being something other, nor do we call it "being," nor "one," nor "all," nor "principle of the all" nor "beyond all things." We deny that it is possible to make any statement about it at all. But this again is not its nature, viz., the expressions "not a thing," "beyond all," "causeless cause," and "unrelated to anything," nor do these attributes

[29] Frede 1987b, pp. 269–75.

[30] For the word *endeixis* in the *Peri Archon,* see Galperine 1987, Introduction, p. 34, n. 108.

[31] On this topic, see Galperine 1987, Introduction, pp. 34–5.

constitute its nature. Rather, they serve simply to remove anything that arises after the Ineffable. (R.I 11, 15–25)

Again, Damascius does not reify the conventions of apophatic discourse, nor does he claim that such negative language succeeds in referring:

No name will be able to convey the meaning of the transcendent, since a name belongs to a system of reference. One must finally deny the [name of the transcendent] as well. But even denial is a form of discourse, and that makes what is denied an object of discourse, but the transcendent is nothing, not even something to be denied, in no way expressible, not knowable at all, so that one can not even negate its negation. Rather the only way of revealing that of which we speak is simply the deferral of language and of conceptions about it. (C-W I.21.12–18)

A discourse on the Ineffable is not a metaphysical treatise in the usual sense of the word. Its purpose is to remove confidence in established doctrine and to reverse, as Damascius puts it, the more usual direction of language. Language turns back upon itself because its purpose is to negate its own function. Damascius' chosen name for his style of metaphysics is *peritrope*, and this word too has a history in the annals of Skepticism.[32] Although it can be literally translated as "reversal," its sense in the context of dialectic refers to arguments overturned by means of premises internal to them. Sextus Empiricus, for example, refers to a whole class of such overturning arguments, or arguments whose very assertion undermines the dialectical stance of the person who asserts them.[33] Damascius' appropriation of this Skeptical term relates primarily to any statement made about the Ineffable, since the Ineffable is by designation and definition outside the reach of any linguistic system: "our language is self-refuting when we attach such predicates to the Ineffable as 'Outside of Language,' 'Nothing at all,' 'Ungraspable by the Intellect' " (C-W I.10).

In the history of their debates with the dogmatists, Skeptics were often accused of hoisting themselves on their own petard, particularly with regard to their stance of *akatalepsia,* their assertion that

[32] For the history of the word *peritrope* in Skeptical debates, see Burnyeat 1976.

[33] See Burnyeat 1976. For example, someone who asserts that causes do not exist is undermined if he or she attempts to demonstrate this assertion by invoking reasons for this assertion.

nothing is apprehensible. The Skeptics reply that *akatalepsia* is not a descriptive or indicative term; it does not purport to describe a state of affairs in the world, but rather signifies the the Skeptical *epoche*, the refusal to make any statement about the nature of things.[34] If the Skeptics embrace *epoche*, suspension of belief, as their solution to the impending dangers of *peritrope*, one could argue that, in a parallel way, Damascius embraces silence or ineffability. As he says concerning the first principle, "we define this term, 'ineffable,' in such a way that it is not even a term" (C-W I.62.10). The "limit of philosophical discourse" (πέρας τοῦ λόγου) refers to the complete removal of any proposition or any statement about reality. This limit is "silence without recourse" (C-W I.22), or "silence that frees us from [our own] productions" (C-W I.22).

Doctrinal Consequences

The Henads

So far we have seen that Damascius' approach to the first principle has methodological implications. Nevertheless, as Damascius himself says concerning the Ineffable, this method does not leave one with much to say about reality, especially given that the name, "Ineffable," does not name any kind of reality. As long as there remains something to name, one has not yet taken away all that is added to reality from outside, from the productions of the mind.

> In a certain way the Ineffable amounts to a negation, and in using this kind of language, I do not intend to predicate anything of it or to posit anything about it. Rather, what I intend by this name or by what it names is neither a denial nor an affirmation, but the complete removal of everything. (C-W I, 62.4–7)

Still, it is legitimate to ask, and Damascius does ask, "Can one posit any intermediary between the Ineffable and what can be expressed in language?" (C-W I, 62.3) In other words, does Damascius have

[34] "A story of the painter Apelles applies to the Sceptics. They say that he was painting a horse and wanted to represent in his picture the lather on the horse's mouth; but he was so unsuccessful that he gave up, took the sponge on which he had been wiping off the colours from his brush, and flung it at the picture. And when it hit the picture, it produced a representation of the horse's lather" (I 27, Annas and Barnes translation).

anything at all to say about the nature of reality apart from the Ineffable?

To look at this question, we must consider once more the thought of Proclus. In asking this question about what is intermediary, Damascius no doubt alludes to the Procline tendency to multiply levels of reality in general, as we saw earlier "the processions of real being, far more even than the positions of physical bodies in space, leave no vacuum, but everywhere there are mean terms between extremities, which provide for them a mutual linkage" (*De Prov.* IV, 20). Damascius especially has in mind Proclus' doctrine of the Henads, which function as intermediaries between the One and particular beings, and between Being/Intellect and that which exists before Being.[35] Although they find their place within the cosmos as causal principles, coming first in the *seirai* or *taxeis*, the orders of Being, that together constitute the vast diversity of all possible forms of existence, they are also *theoi*, gods, and perhaps no less than names or aspects of the divine principle whose fullness is thus expressed. Although these brief remarks do not provide an adequate account of the Procline doctrine, it is perhaps enough to contrast the realism of Proclus with the somewhat hesitant nature of Damascius' own discussion of the Henads.

Ideally, to apprehend reality, the mind should be able to strip itself of all of its determinate notions, all of its concepts or preconceptions. According to Damascius, however, such a feat is impossible, since the mind by its very nature invents things. Mind operates by projecting its own determinate notions onto a reality that surpasses binary oppositions. In trying to apprehend the One, the mind inevitably fails and instead grasps the One under the aspect of the Henads, namely, the One-Many, the Many-One, and the Unified. That is, the mind must contemplate the One as all things, or else it must contemplate all things as dependent upon the One, or else it must contemplate the expansion of the One into all things. Each of these ways of looking at the One is a kind of projection that the mind conjures up as it grapples with intractable metaphysical problems. It would be better to admit that when the mind unifies itself, it tends to apprehend unity, whereas when the mind pays attention to a number of objects, then it tends to apprehend multiplicity:

[35] Cf. *ET*, 113–65 and *Platonic Theology* III, 1–6.

Neither "the one" nor "all things" accords with [the One]. These are a pair of binary oppositions that divide our consciousness [of the One]. If we focus on the One as simple, we lose sight of the complete perfection of that principle. But if we conceive it as all things simultaneously, we destroy its unity and simplicity. The cause of this is that we ourselves are divided and we distractedly consider its characteristics as if they were separate. (C-W I, 80.19–81.2)

Damascius does not say that the Henads are unreal, but he does caution that the basis of any attempt to know reality must be the Ineffable; anything that falls outside of this principle is, in a certain respect, illusory. Throughout his discussion of the Henads, he suggests that these are really methods of contemplating the first principle, necessary, perhaps, as stages of approach, but ultimately not to be reified as absolutes: "What I was just now attempting to explain, is that the division of these multiple acts of gnosis must be contracted into a complete gnosis of the complete one that is the simple unity of plural henads" (C-W I.66). Damascius elaborates this method of first using the Henads as a way of approaching the unity of the first principle and then detaching from them as a greater, more expansive form of contemplation liberates the mind from its own activity of grasping:

That is how we arrive at being, first by means of each form which we experience as a separate entity, we meditate on that form as not only without parts but also as unified, trying to see all of them in each, if one can put it this way. And then we take them all together, discriminated as they are, but remove their circumferences, just as if we were making many streams into one pond that has no boundaries, except that we do not meditate on it as unified from all forms as we do the one body of water, but rather as before them all, as one the form of the water before the actually divided bodies of water. That is how we concentrate ourselves in the One, first by gathering together [multiplicity] and then by detaching ourselves from that which is gathered, into that One, which transcends their multiplicity. (C-W I, 82.19–82.6)

This habit of grasping aspects of reality and absolutizing them is the greatest obstacle to the student: "This is the cause of all of our problems, that our thoughts run off into complete separation if we hear the name 'other,' and muddle things together if we hear the name, 'identity.' " From Proclus' solemn enumeration of reality's various stations, Damascius turns his attention to the knower, looking at how the knower's own conditioning intrudes and insinuates

itself into the total occasion, so to speak, of what is being known.[36] There is a subtle difficulty in assessing the extent to which Damascius can be said to uphold the reality of the Henads. Often his language suggests that outside of the Ineffable, illusion reigns; all that is below the One is somehow superimposed on the One.

In this sense, the Ineffable designates that which, even within human beings, remains unbounded by the projections that constitute our ordinary notion of reality. Damascius asks: "Is it the case that nothing of the ineffable encroaches upon the things here?" He answers, "As many things as constitute the multiplicity in a divided mode, the One is all of these things before its division . . . The One dissolves all things by means of its own simplicity and it is All things before [they are] all things" (C-W I, 24.11). At the level of ordinary objects, Damascius transmutes the ineffability of the absolute into a puzzle about the status of individuation: picking out an object in the world as a particular entity involves absolutizing some one determinate property, creating a kind of synecdoche that falsely views any given individual as isolable from all other individuals, by virtue of this characterization.

In fact, to use a species name as, for example, "human being," or to use a generic term such as "living being," amounts to a virtual catachresis: "The earthly human being is [designated in accordance with] a particular property from which [the Form] human being also gets its name; one could say the same about any other human attribute, as well as the property of being [the Form] Human Being." In using language, we seize upon differences in such a way as to absolutize the bearer of a different predicate, or we are tricked by a common name into assuming an ontological unity. Perhaps nowhere is this cautionary attitude or wariness of illusion more pro-

[36] Damascius' apparent dismantling of the fundamental structures of Neoplatonic metaphysics through sustained criticism of such tenets as causation, emanation, intellection, and reversion is matched by his equally critical stance toward the ontological orientation of Neoplatonism as a whole. Hence although Damascius is not a subjectivist or strong anti-realist (he does not think that the ontology of such principles as the Henads, the intellect, and so forth is the result of psychic projection), he does at times distance himself from an ontological approach. This distance results from his concern to reorient the philosophy of Neoplatonism away from the baroque scholasticism that begins to preponderate in the Athenian school.

nounced than in Damascius' critique of Neoplatonic theories of intellect.

Intellect

In what follows, I will be investigating Damascius' critique of the Neoplatonic theory of intellect, as well as his own views on the limitations of intellect. In this material most of all, Damascius' familiarity with Skeptical techniques is pronounced. Quite obviously, the critique of knowledge forms the basis of Academic Skepticism and later Pyrrhonism; the undermining of all dogmas is in fact subsidiary to this project, in the sense that *akatalepsia*, non-apprehension, is both a foundational premise of Skepticism as well as a method for achieving its goals. Just as the Skeptics need not provide their own criterion of truth to successfully demolish the dogmatists' *katalepic phantasia*,[37] Damascius works by showing difficulties inherent in Neoplatonic conceptions of intellect.

Damascius' strategy is most interesting; he subverts the identity thesis, according to which intellect is its objects (the Neoplatonists appropriated the Aristotelian doctrine of isomorphism)[38] and instead insinuates a correspondence theory of truth into the Neoplatonist theory: "we can say, therefore, that knowledge completely accords with its object, *but it is not its object.*" From a standard Neoplatonic perspective, the position at which Damascius arrives is one of extreme unorthodoxy. One way of framing Damascius' strategy in terms of the history of philosophy, is to say that he takes an anti-Aristotelian line against Plotinus and Proclus, though of course his language is influenced by the epistemological vocabulary of the Stoics.[39] The Aristotelian doctrine of isomorphism is enunciated at

[37] Some scholars do accept that Carneades' *pithanon* functions as such an alternative criterion, but see Bett 1989 for an opposite viewpoint.

[38] Cf. *Enneads* V.3.5.45.

[39] Here even the standard Neoplatonist account will differ from that of Aristotle. For Plotinus explicitly *denies* that the object of thought can act upon the mind or that the mind *receives* the form in the act of intellection. Instead, such receptivity occurs only at the level of *doxa*, or opinion. Plotinus etymologizes the word δόχα (opinion), from the verb δέχομαι (to receive), in keeping with Aristotelian isomorphism: opinion receives, indeed, that is why it is opinion, because it receives something from an object that is substantially different from that which receives it.

De anima III.8; in thinking, the mind becomes identical with the form of the intelligible object. Aristotle employs a strong analogy between sense-perception and mental perception, describing ordinary thought as a kind of mental receptivity to form.[40] Here is the relevant passage from the *De anima*:[41]

But if thought is like perception, then the mind must be acted upon by the thought object or something else must [happen] which is analogous to this. Therefore, the mind must be impassive, but must be capable of receiving the form.

In the following passage we see that Damascius preserves the strong perception/intellection analogy that Aristotle relies on, but nevertheless inserts a modified Stoicizing account, in which the object of knowledge becomes analogous to the impression, the *phantasia*, which presumably carries representational features of the world. Damascius is careful to disassociate his theory from standard Neoplatonic accounts of intellection by coining a new term, *gnosma*, which is formed by analogy to the word, *noema*, but presents none of the associated epistemology of noesis.

For sense perception corresponds to the object of sense perception, the faculty of representation corresponds to the impression, and the same is true of the faculty of opinion and of discursive reason: the one corresponds to the object of opinion and the other corresponds to the object of thought. In general, then, knowledge corresponds to the object of knowledge, to coin a new term for this, and the object of knowledge is that which is capable of being known when it has come to be an object of knowledge for a knower. We can say, therefore, that knowledge completely accords with its object, *but it is not its object.*

Most Neoplatonists agreed with Plotinus that in the case of intellectual knowledge, "it is necessary for the knower to be *identical* with the known and for the intellect to be *identical* with its object" (V.3.5.22).[42] Earlier we found Damascius exceptionally denying the

[40] For a more detailed discussion of the differences between Plotinus' understanding of the identity theory (the doctrine of isomorphism) and Aristotle's notion of the identity that obtains between the form actualized in the act of perception and the form inherent in the hylopmorphic compound that becomes the object of perception, see chapters 4 and 5. See also Emilsson 1988.

[41] *De anima*, III.4.13–16; 429a3.

[42] For the continuation of this doctrine in Proclus *IT* II 287, 3–5: "Truth is assimilation of the knower to the known." Cf. further II 287, 9–11.

identity thesis: "we can say, therefore, that knowledge completely accords with its object, *but it is not its object.*" Even when Damascius' arguments apparently recall a Skeptical position, however, they are not always motivated by Skeptical ends, as will become apparent when we compare Damascius with Sextus.

In the following text, Sextus Empiricus argues against the possibility of intellectual knowledge by demonstrating the weaknesses inherent in a correspondence theory of truth. There is no way to guarantee the representational accuracy of one's impressions, since the mind is always conditioned by its own experiences.[43]

The intellect does not of itself get in contact with external objects and receive impressions from them, but it does so by means of the senses; and the senses do not apprehend the external objects but only their own *pathe,* if anything. And so the phantasia will be of a sensory pathos, which is not the same thing as the external object.

Nor again can one say that the soul apprehends the external objects by means of the sensory experiences because the experiences of the senses are similar to the external objects. "For from which will the intellect know whether the *pathe* of the senses are similar to the objects of sense, when it has not itself met with these external objects . . . Therefore not even on the basis of similarity will the intellect be able to judge these objects in accord with the phantasia."[44]

Read alongside of this passage from Sextus Empiricus, Damascius hardly seems to be a Skeptic. After all, Sextus insists that the soul *does not* apprehend any external object, but only its own representation of a putative object. Again, the Skeptics will deny that objects correspond to our representations of them,[45] whereas Damascius asserts that because intellect conforms to its objects, it is capable of revealing those objects. Therefore the mind does truly know, per-

[43] It is important to keep in mind that Sextus here assimilates all forms of thinking to intellectual knowledge and maintains no distinction between intellectual and other kinds of mental activity.

[44] Sextus Empiricus, *PH* bk. 2, sections 70–72.

[45] On the Skeptics' distinction between appearances and what appears to us, cf. Annas and Barnes 1985, p. 23: "To say how things appear is to say how they impress us or how they strike us, whether or not it is via our perceptual apparatus that the impression is made. In this sense we regularly contrast how things appear or seem with how they really are. This contrast lies at the heart of Pyrrhonism and its Ten Modes."

ceive, and opine about objects: "knowledge corresponds to the object of knowledge."

Nevertheless Damascius criticizes the Neoplatonist theory of intellection and specifically the identity thesis that underlies it, in the same way that the Skeptics criticize Stoic epistemology and the correspondence theory that underlies it. Since the Skeptics must show only that the representational account of perception given by the Stoics itself entails that the mind immediately grasps merely *phantasiai* and not objects, they can at once insist on the representational gap that this account leaves open.[46] Similarly, Damascius emphasizes the substantive distinction between the knower and the known to show that the intellect never encounters its object, being, as it is in itself. Moreover, he uses premises supplied by Neoplatonic metaphysics to demonstrate this non-identity of subject and object.

In his own words, Damascius wants to show that knowledge is a relationship that must maintain "the actual distinction between the knower and the known, with no crossing of boundaries" (R.I.181). The context for his attack on the identity thesis is Proclan metaphysics. Specifically, he exploits Proclus' exposition of the triadic rule of causation (*ET* 30;31) according to which every effect remains in and returns to its cause.[47] Since every immaterial entity (for example, soul or intellect) has the capacity for self-reversion as well, knowledge is the exemplary instance of epistrophe;[48] knowledge equates with the reversion or return of intellect to its own hypostasis, being. It remains for Damascius to overturn this theory from within, a task most easily accomplished by accepting Proclus' account of knowledge as reversion: Because it returns to Being and to the affirmation of Being, knowledge could correctly be called "a return" (C-W II.148).

Here at last the identity thesis becomes the target. Although knowledge entails the reversion of intellect to being, reversion itself entails the fundamental distinction between that which reverts and that to which the knower reverts:[49]

[46] On the nature of Stoic representations in terms of theories of truth, see Annas 1991, *Hellenistic Philosophy of Mind* (Berkeley).

[47] Dodds 1963, pp. 217–18. On this topic, see Gersh 1973.

[48] For this doctrine, see Lloyd 1990, pp. 126–33.

[49] Although the argument Damascius uses to defeat the identity thesis seems heuristic and even ad hoc (what reason does Damascius offer for his denial that the separa-

Now it is the nature of intellect to return to being and of knowledge to be directed toward being. Furthermore, every return is of something that has proceeded and is already separate and therefore in need of return, although return does not eradicate the separation. Rather that which is separate returns to that from which it has become distinct just insofar as it remains distinct and in exactly the way that it remains distinct. All of this is evident from the name, *gnosis.* (C-W II.149)

There seem to be three steps in Damascius' refutation of the Neoplatonic identity thesis. In step one, Damascius accepts Proclus' theory of intellectual reversion, but, in step two, he concludes that reversion entails the non-identity of the knower (intellect) and the object known (or being). Finally, in step three, Damascius applies this denial of the identity thesis to Neoplatonic epistemology and concludes that the intellect never knows being as it is in itself because the intellect can never be strictly identical with being. It is this last application that raises the most interesting questions about Dasmascius' own theory of knowledge.

As a consequence of his denial of the Neoplatonic identity thesis, Damascius concludes that knowing and being known is a relationship that consists in alterity:

[Question:] what does it mean to say, "capable of being known," and how does this differ from Being? [Answer:] Something is an object of knowledge insofar as it exists in relation to another, whereas it is Being by virtue of what it is in itself. (C-W II.149)

But if the intellect never knows being as it is in itself, must one then conclude that intellect fails to know being at all, that being is unknowable? Being is not exactly unknowable, but it is available to the knower only *qua* object of knowledge:

[Objection:] But it is Being that intellect desires. [Answer:] It may desire Being, but it attains Being as an object of knowledge. Perhaps we should say that its desire is also of Being insofar as it is known since desires naturally correspond to the capacity to attain the objects of desire, and it follows that, for the knower, to attain Being is to attain it insofar as it is known. (C-W II.150)

tion of knower and known can be eradicated?), it rests upon a refinement of Proclus' theory of reversion, according to which there are three different modes or degrees of return: vital, substantial, and cognitive. Damascius wants to rank the different kinds according to the degree of unity achieved by means of the reversion; cognitive reversion, or knowledge, is the least unitive form.

Again by analogy to the Skeptics who assert that the intellect knows only its own *pathe*, and never reaches the object itself, Damascius concludes that the intellect knows its object *qua* object known. In other words, as he puts it, "intellect knows Being as the appearance (τὸ φανόν) of Being" (C-W II.150). After a lengthy and somewhat tendentious argument, Damascius offers his version of the Skeptical thesis we saw operating before in Sextus Empiricus. While the Skeptics maintain that the mind can know only the *phantasia*, or impression, Damascius renders this doctrine with the Neoplatonizing counterpart, that intellect can grasp only the *phanon*, or appearance.

Obviously, there is a divergence as well as a similarity when we compare the results of Damascius' critique of knowledge with that of the Skeptics, especially at the linguistic level of comparison. Few if any direct linguistic echoes connect Damascius' critique of Neoplatonist theories of intellect to the Skeptics, though one could argue that he deliberately modifies the Skeptical endorsement of "appearances only" by speaking of "manifestation." Like the Skeptics, Damascius takes premises from within the dogmatic system he criticizes to undermine a theory of knowledge that is foundational to that system. The position at which he arrives – the unknowability of being as it is in itself, the separation of intellect and its object, Being, and the denial of the identity thesis – has, it seems to me, recognizable analogs in the Skeptics' maintenance of *akatalepsia*.

A further question remains concerning the meaning and results of this stance with regard to the intellect, though constraints of space permit merely a survey and not a resolution of the issues involved. Some scholars have suggested that one observes an emergent antirealism or even a subjectivism operating in the philosophy of Damascius.[50] While this view has been harshly criticized,[51] one is still left with the need to interpret the often striking formulations encountered in the *Peri Archon*:

Being, insofar as it is in itself alone, is also undifferentiated. But when intellect, separated off, stands apart from Being and Being becomes no longer undifferentiated, but rather something differentiated from that which

[50] Cf. Combès's Introduction to Volume I of C-W. Cf. also Combès 1976.

[51] Beierwaltes, for example, criticizes in a rather sweeping way the "Bergsonian" flavor of certain strands of scholarship concerned with Late Athenian Neoplatonism in his monograph, *Denken des Einen* (Frankfurt, 1985).

has been differentiated, to this extent the object of knowledge is revealed in it. (*C-W*II.152. 5–8)

One could say several things in light of this passage without invoking idealism. For example, it is easy to point out that Plotinus had already insisted on the differentiated nature of intellectual knowledge and on the multiplicity inherent in intellectual apprehension. Again, it becomes increasingly common in the later tradition for Neoplatonists gradually to assimilate non-discursive thinking to discursive thinking, by offering more subtle distinctions in the intelligible world (for example, Proclus distinguishes between noetic and noeric), and by relying on the doctrine of the Henads to theorize about the possibilities of a truly unified consciousness. Finally, however, Damascius' criticisms of the Neoplatonic identity theory must be seen within the context of dialectic within the Late Academy. This critique of knowledge initiates a strategy that goes against the grain of Neoplatonic orthodoxy by undermining the dualism fundamental to the entire metaphysical construction. Platonic metaphysics traditionally relies upon the distinction between appearance and reality, or between being and phenomena. Damascius subverts the central ambition of Neoplatonism: the attainment of knowledge that unites the knower with reality.[52] He readily concedes that this ambition, which ties the ontological affirmation of the subject into a theory of knowledge, is the basis for the traditional Neoplatonic conception of gnosis, going so far as to etymologize this word in accordance with it: "Another meaning of the word knowledge (*gnosis*) might be, a production (*genesis*) of Being (*ontos*) and of essence (*ousias*), since it is by means of a return to Being that the knower comes to possess Being or essence."

In the Neoplatonic tradition, this doctrine motivates the search for wisdom, which becomes a rescue mission for the recovery of reality on the part of an alienated subject whose very status as a subject drives a wedge between himself and being. Finally, this drive toward unity itself must be the last reliable assurance that our loss can be made up. What is singular about this appetite, according to Plato, is that of all appetites, it cannot be deceived: we can never be satisfied with the appearance of a good, we want what is actually

[52] On the soteriological conception of the spiritual circuit, see Lloyd 1992, the chapter entitled "The Spiritual Circuit."

good for us.[53] So with the loss of being: we do not want to appear to be, we want to be. Reality and its appearance are not interchangeable.

Damascius seems compelled to redefine the Platonic meaning of eros, hitherto always defined as a drive for truth or being.[54] For Damascius, this quest itself must be seen as a quest for appearances:

[Objection:] But it is Being that intellect desires. [Answer:] It may desire Being, but it attains Being as an object of knowledge. Perhaps we should say that its desire is also of Being insofar as it is known since desires naturally correspond to the capacity to attain the objects of desire, and it follows that, for the knower, to attain Being is to attain it insofar as it is known.

In stark contrast to the Neoplatonic identity thesis, for Damascius, knowing and being known consist in alterity:

[Question:] what does it mean to say, "capable of being known," and how does this differ from Being? [Answer:] Something is an object of knowledge insofar as it exists in relation to another, whereas it is Being by virtue of what it is in itself.

Damascius' point is not that all is illusion or that reality subsides into mere appearances. Nor would he recommend the abandonment of metaphysics and the acceptance of a life based on phenomenal presentations. Rather, his point is that Being in itself should not be grasped as being, or a being, or an object, as something distinct and outside of a knower substantially different from Being. In truly unified knowledge, Being is not something attained, and hence no desire for Being can be satisfied. We have already looked at this passage from Damascius' discussion of the Unified, one of the three aspects of the noetic triad:

There is something intelligible, which you should know in the flower of the intellect.

If you turn your own intellect toward it and know it as an object, then you will not know it . . .

I ask you to know this without strain; turn back the sacred eye of your soul and bring the empty mind into that intelligible, until you comprehend it, since it is outside the intellect. (C-W I.105.3–5; 9–13 = Or. Ch. fr. 1)

[53] Plato *Symposium* 206a; *Meno* 77e.
[54] Cf. *Enneads* III.6.9.

As Damascius comments, in unitive knowledge, the mind does not attempt to assimilate the object to itself. Rather, the mind completely abandons itself (ἀφιεῖσα ἑαυτήν), and itself becomes the object; the object no longer exists (ὡς οὐκ ὄντα μηδὲ ἐπιζητοῦσα), and hence the mind no longer desires to discover it. Here, one can no longer speak of intellect knowing being. Because intellect offers its separate identity to the aspect of the One it contemplates as unity, it is not possible to posit intellect as an absolutely separate and distinct hypostasis. In quoting the phrase "outside the intellect" from the Chaldean Oracles, Damascius suggests that intellect is not separate from the One. This non-dual approach brings the One into all the hypostases without thereby collapsing them. Again using metaphorical language, Damascius describes the experience in which intellect disappears:

> When first we try to see the sun we see it from afar. But as we get closer to it, we actually see it less: finally we don't see it or anything else, since we have ourselves become the light. There is no more eye of enlightenment. (C-W I.84)

Everything short of the absolute is a manifestation of that principle; when Damascius limits intellect's knowledge to the appearance of being, he suggests that Being still falls short of the goal that eros implies but that intellect can never discover.

Conclusion

In the *Peri Archon*, Damascius criticizes the foundational premises of Procline metaphysics in his attempt to renew the contemplative form of his tradition and to guide his school by means of a radically non-dual philosophy. Perhaps it will be helpful to summarize the substance of his criticisms by glancing at those propositions in the *Elements of Theology* directly abrogated in the *Doubts and Solutions Concerning First Principles.* Damascius criticizes Propositions 7, "Every productive cause is superior to that which it produces"; 11, "All that exists proceeds from a single first cause"; 35, "Every effect remains in its cause, proceeds from it, and reverts upon it"; 75, "Every cause properly transcends its resultant," and possibly several of the propositions concerning the doctrine of Henads.

The self-refuting nature of metaphysical discourse goes some way toward explaining the apparent heterodoxy of many of Damascius'

statements, which can accordingly be seen more as metalinguistic than as metaphysical. When he insists upon the separation of the knower and the known or assimilates the One to the notion of totality, he knowingly breaches fundamental Neoplatonic principles: for Plotinus the One is by definition transcendent, and so forth. Why should Damascius be able to get away with such arguments, when no Neoplatonist in his right mind would agree to them in the first place?

Here I think we see a certain forgetfulness on the part of the tradition. Perhaps what happens in the case of Damascius is that the critique of discursivity that lies at the heart of the tradition must be reperformed and reenacted by means of textual practices. Damascius' method of teaching consists in taking away intellectual supports. He often refers to the effect at which he aims as a 'radical purification' of our conceptions.[55] If his criticisms of intellection or of causality appear to be unorthodox, we should nevertheless refrain from accusing him of reducing intellect to the level of discursive thinking or holding the One to be commensurate with ordinary objects.

Perhaps the most surprising passage in the *Doubts and Solutions Concerning First Principles* occurs near the end of the treatise, where Damascius appears to eschew traditional metaphysics in favor of revealed wisdom:

> We use human language to speak about principles that are divine in the highest possible degree. We cannot conceive or name them without being compelled to use our own ideas about realities that far exceed every mind, life, and being. Even when the Gods instruct some of us concerning these or other matters, they [do not teach] such [thoughts] as the Gods themselves have. Instead, they use an appropriate language when instructing Egyptians, Syrians, or Greeks . . . and so transmit matters of great import to human beings by using a human dialect. (C-W III.140.11–25)

Damascius concludes his first aporia on the nature of the Ineffable by reaffirming that it is neither a cause nor not a cause, neither a source nor not a source, that it is neither one nor many. By reperforming this critique of discursivity, Damascius achieves his aim in the quiescence of discursive thinking. The only remaining approach to the One is, he says, "by keeping quiet, by remaining in the secret

[55] *diakatharis, apokatharein.*

recess of the soul and not leaving it" (I.15.14). No doubt he did not write *Doubts and Solutions Concerning First Principles* for neophytes or beginners in philosophy. It is a highly technical and intellectually demanding work that assumes familiarity not only with Plato but also with the history of Neoplatonism and with various forms of esoteric theology. It is written for those who belong to the tradition but whose intellectual activity impedes their progress. Finally, it is meant for those whose doubts are almost insurmountable, who remain dissatisfied with dogmatism and unconvinced by elaborate metaphysical constructions. For such people, the only way to remove doubt is to remove thought altogether. This radical solution may remind us of the earlier Skeptical *epoche* of the Hellenistic Academy. And yet, this strong medicine is prescribed for those who, eschewing every panacea, will only be satisfied with an absolute cure for what ails them. Finally, the sole remedy for ignorance is, in Damascius' words, perseverance in unknowing.

Appendix: Damascius on Intellectual Reversion (C-W II, pp. 148–152.8)

Context: Damascius has been discussing The Unified, the last henad of the noetic triad that comprises Damascius' second hypostasis. The Unified is the aspect of this hypostasis that communicates with other levels of being; it is the source of further emanation because multiplicity proceeds from The Unified. In this section, Damascius is ultimately considering whether or not The Unified can be known by the intellect. The portions translated constitute a digression on the nature of knowledge.

In the first part of this passage, Damascius defines knowledge as a reversion or return to a higher station of being. But if reversion occurs only at the level of intellect, then there is still a fundamental distance between that which reverts (the knower) and that to which the knower reverts. In the second part of this passage Damascius elaborates on the limits of knowledge: knowledge seeks its object and conforms to it. Yet this quest can only come about because of a separation between the knower and the known.

But gnosis is, as the name makes clear, a thought that is in the process of coming to be, and that means intellection. As for intellection (νόησις), be-

cause it inclines or reverts to [the fact of something's] Being and to the [affirmation, "it] is," it could justly be called "a state of return" (νεόεσις). But as it is, using a more elevated diction and achieving euphony by contracting [the vowels] into *eta*, we call it νόησις. And so too intellect (nous) is named from the fact that it returns to Being. Now nous returns both by means of substantial and vital reversion but in the third rank and as it were distantly, by means of gnostic intellection, and because nous is gnostic, and so it returns by means of actuality or in actuality, but neither substantially nor by means of the vital power. And that is why this kind of intellection is something that is involved more with becoming, and this is also more apparent to us, because it is especially distinct. And that is why the majority of philosophers define intellect in terms of [intellectual reversion]. But also before this there is the distinct and delimited hypostasis that exists before reversion and it was necessary to call this *noesis* before the gnostic reversion because it is first in reaching Being from the state of procession, and from this return nous gets its name, and before gnosis it both returns and reverts already.

And perhaps gnosis is the coming to be of Being and of substance. The knower certainly becomes substantial by means of the return to Being in the act of gnosis, but not in a primary way, but rather in a kind of substantiation that is nevertheless characterized by becoming. And that is why nous is the realities, as Aristotle too says.

Names should fit closely with realities, however ingenious one's terminology. That nous subsists and that gnosis is projected as the return to Being, and that every return is of something that once proceeded and is now already separate and therefore in need of return, and that return does not eliminate separation, but rather it actually leads back that which is separate, insofar as it is separate, into that from which it has divided itself and proceeded, all of this is evident even from the name, gnosis.

But what is [the essence] of knowledge? Is it a halo, taking as it were the first place in the procession of light that comes about in the knower from the object known? Certainly sense perception accords with the perceptual object, and the representation subsists according to impression, and so with opinion and discursive thought; the latter accords with the object of thought, the former with the object of opinion. In general then knowledge subsists according to the object of knowledge (γνῶσμα), if this expression is allowed, and the object of knowledge is that which can be known, but [as it] already subsists in the knower. [Another way to put it is to say that] knowledge accords with this object of knowledge but it is not the object of knowledge. **Question:** What then is the experience of the knower when it does not yet know? **Answer:** It seeks out the object of knowledge. Therefore knowledge is the attainment of the object of knowledge *qua* object of knowledge. For if in fact it attains Being, this is [only] insofar as Being is an object of knowledge. **Question:** What then is the nature of the object of knowledge and how does it differ from Being? **Answer:** [The difference is this:] the object of knowledge is related to another, whereas that which is what it is in itself is Being.

Perhaps this [way of putting it] indicates what belongs to either of them, but what their nature is has not yet been shown. Being is the hypostasis, but the object of knowledge is as it were the manifestation of the hypostasis. And one might say that the hypostasis is one thing in the case of the material form, but quite another in the case of the sensible [particular]. The sensible aspect falls outside of it and makes it known, making it known until the point of sense-perception, and so comes about in way that corresponds to sense-perception. That is also the way that manifestation [is related to] Being, as if it were a light that precedes Being [until it reaches] the knower, running out to meet the knower as the latter ascends. The light is coordinate with Being and it becomes one with it and it accomplishes and satisfies its desire for Being because of the completion of its intrinsic illumination. **Question:** So then intellect does not know Being, but [only] the manifestation of Being? **Answer:** [It knows] Being insofar as it is manifest, and it is manifest in accordance with the object of knowledge. And even if intellect could know Being, in exactly the way that it knows that which is capable of being known, nevertheless all that is capable of being known would be entirely [present] as an object of knowledge. The result is that intellect does know Being, but necessarily, as we say, according to the manifestation [of Being]. **Question:** But it is Being [that Intellect] desires. **Answer:** It may desire Being, but it obtains it as an object of knowledge. And perhaps it would be better to say that its desire is also for Being according to the object of knowledge. After all, desires and the attainments [of desire] have identical objects, and correspondingly for the knower, the attainment of Being is according to that which is known. **Question:** What do we mean by the expression, "manifestation?" **Answer:** The manifestation borders on the secondary principles and it furnishes itself in proportion to the measure of those wishing to enjoy it and to enfold the illumination that precedes it. **Question:** Is it therefore the case that the whole [of Being] is not knowable, but rather only the illumination, just as the color alone is visible, but not the underlying substrate? **Answer:** Yes, emphatically. But this should cause no surprise, but rather be a necessary consequence, that Being is something that belongs to the first principles but remains always out of the reach of the second principles and hence, ineffable. For in this way too that which is entirely out of bounds and ineffable is uniformly related to everything else, and each of the other things is toward its secondaries by itself ineffable and also becomes ineffable toward something. And this is especially unremarkable, as I said, but one might perhaps wonder whether intellect knows [just] the preceding illumination of Being, and not Being itself, that is, according to its manifestation. The **Answer** is that the manifestation of Being is the name for this prior illumination, [which is] not, however, a kind of emanation from it, as the light that surrounds the earth is from the sun. Rather, it is as if someone were to see the sun itself by means of its natural brilliance. **Question:** Then [intellect] knows only the surface [of Being], since it knows the manifestation of Being in the way [that one sees] a color? **Answer:** Being is intelligible through and through; there is no part of it that does not shine

out and hasten to be revealed, just as you would say of a crystal or of some other transparent object that it is visible as a whole, because the nature of what is visible permeates it throughout.

Nevertheless, the body is one thing and that which is manifest throughout something else, just as in the intelligible order the manifestation would be other than Being. And the same thing will result, first, that [knowledge] is not of Being, but of the manifestation which is other than Being (for in the case of that which is completely transparent, it is not the body that is visible, but only the color). Next, in the case of something that is completely indeterminate, will we be able to distinguish manifestation as one thing, and Being as another, which then is like the substance for its manifestation, or differs from it however it in fact does?

To this we reply as follows: The Being that is what it is, insofar as it is just Being, is without distinction.